Pruning equipment should be sharp and well maintained. Loppers and hand pruners should be of the bypass or scissors type to prevent crushed limbs. Saws should have triple edged teeth for quicker and cleaner cuts. A hard hat, leather gloves and eye protection are recommended.

3-Step Cut

Avoid tearing bark by using these three sequential cuts when pruning a limb you cannot support with one hand while cutting with the other. Torn bark often leads to decay.

Step 1
At least 12 – 18” from the final cut, make an undercut approximately 1/3 of the way through the branch.

Step 2
Outside the first cut, sawing from the top down, completely remove the branch. With the majority of the branch weight now gone, bark tearing should not occur.

Step 3
Begin the final cut outside the branch bark ridge, continuing at a slightly outward angle, finishing just outside the branch collar. Remember it is not necessary or appropriate to paint pruning wounds.

A properly pruned tree should look like nothing drastic has been done. Good pruning should not be determined by how many branches are on the ground, but rather by what remains in the tree.
When to prune?
The best time to prune any deciduous tree is when it is dormant, typically November - March in Wisconsin. The second best time is mid-summer, after leaf growth is complete. The worst time to do major pruning is in the spring, when tree buds and/or leaves are still growing and food reserves are low. Dead limbs may be removed any time of year.

How much to prune?
The amount to remove depends on the tree’s size, species and age as well as your pruning objectives. Young trees can tolerate more branch removal than mature trees. Avoid removing more than 25% of the live branches no matter the tree’s age, size or species.

What to do…
Before pruning get to know your tree. Take a step back and envision what you want it to look like in the future. If your tree is mature, its structure cannot be altered much. Limit the pruning of newly planted trees to dead, broken or torn branches or to establish only one central trunk if the tree has two or more. Structural pruning may begin the second or third year after planting and every other year thereafter until about year 10. After that, pruning every 5 to 7 years should reduce any major structural problems.

Remove crossing, competing, broken, dead, vertical, downward-growing or sucker branches each time you prune. Never cut back your tree’s leader, the top-most growing point of the tree, it is vital to letting the tree develop its natural form. Avoid removing branches larger than 4” in diameter as the wound takes a long time to close.

What not to do…
Do not top trees
This hideous, high maintenance, expensive practice stubs off large limbs regardless of their function and location within the tree. Topping subjects the tree to large open wounds that will not quickly or easily close. It allows insect, disease and decay damage to occur and drastically shortens the life of your tree.

Many times homeowners top trees because they believe the tree is getting too large. Instead of making the tree smaller, topping stimulates the rapid growth of multiple, weakly attached branches. These branches quickly get as tall or taller than the tree was prior to pruning, thus negating the reason for topping in the first place. People and tree care services that advocate topping are not knowledgeable of tree biology and should never be allowed to work on your trees.

Flush cuts
Making a finishing cut that removes the branch bark ridge and branch collar (see Fig. 2) creates a large wound and causes uneven and incomplete wound closure. Compare the results below of a flush cut (left) and proper cut (right).